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The **Miami Herald**

April 6, 2012 Friday

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The Miami Herald
Found on Miami.com

Length: 545 words

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Dateline: April 6 2012

Body

The Drug Enforcement Administration is now investigating the nation's largest retail drugstore chain in its continued crackdown on **Florida's** notorious market in illicit prescription painkillers.

Earlier this week, the DEA searched six Walgreen pharmacies from Fort Pierce to the Tampa Bay area and took records from a **Walgreen** distribution center in Jupiter. The searches were part of an **investigation** of increased traffic in the narcotic oxycodone from those locations, court records show.

Walgreen pharmacies now account for 53 of the top 100 retail sellers of oxycodone in the state, according to an affidavit filed in court by the DEA. Three years ago, no Walgreen pharmacies were among the top 100 sellers of the drug.

"DEA is concerned about the recent significant rise in the number of oxycodone tablets purchased by Walgreens in Florida," said DEA Special Agent in Charge Mark Trouville.

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"We are working and cooperating with the DEA on this matter," said company spokesman Jim Cohn.

In recent years, Florida has become the major source of black-market pain pills for the eastern United States, supplying drug networks from Kentucky to Massachusetts. Many of these pills have been funneled through storefront pain clinics operating in Broward and Palm Beach counties.

As state lawmakers and police have cracked down on these clinics — their numbers have dropped from more than 800 in 2010 to 500 today, state officials say — the DEA has turned its attention to the other links in the chain: pharmacies and drug distributors.

In February, for example, the DEA suspended the license of a Lakeland distribution center for Cardinal Health, one of the nation's largest drug suppliers. The DEA has also targeted independent pharmacies in Broward, and it sought to shut down two CVS pharmacies in Sanford, near Orlando.


These pharmacies have drawn scrutiny for the high number of oxycodone pills they sell. While the average pharmacy in the U.S. distributes 74,000 oxycodone pills annually, the average Florida pharmacy distributes more than 112,000 pills per year, the DEA says.

One Walgreen pharmacy in Fort Myers now under investigation sold more than 2.1 million oxycodone pills in 2011 — more than 22 times the oxycodone sales at the same pharmacy two years earlier, the DEA said.

Other Walgreen stores under investigation are in Fort Pierce, Oviedo, Hudson and Port Richey.

Walgreen has had a reputation for keeping a strict eye on its narcotics sales and being suspicious of prescriptions from pain-clinic doctors. In 2010, undercover agents investigating a West Palm Beach clinic overheard nurses coaching pill-seeking patients to avoid bringing their prescriptions to Walgreen stores, court records show.

"Do not go to Walgreens," the nurse instructed the patients. "I can't say this enough. They are not your friend. They are the enemy."

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Subject: NARCOTICS ENFORCEMENT (91%); INVESTIGATIONS (91%); CONTROLLED SUBSTANCES CRIME (90%); SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE FORCES (90%); CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS (89%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (89%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (75%); PAIN MANAGEMENT (73%); UNOFFICIAL ECONOMY (73%); LAW COURTS & TRIBUNALS (71%); PHYSICIANS & SURGEONS (65%)


Company: WALGREEN CO (92%)


Industry: PHARMACIES (92%); RETAIL PHARMACEUTICALS (91%); PRESCRIPTION DRUGS (91%); PHARMACIES & DRUG STORES (90%); PHARMACEUTICALS TRADE (89%); DISTRIBUTION CENTERS (78%); RETAILERS (78%); PHARMACEUTICALS WHOLESALERS (78%); ANALGESICS (78%); PHYSICIAN PRACTICES (72%); PHYSICIANS & SURGEONS (65%); CLINICS & OUTPATIENT SERVICES (64%)

Geographic: FORT MYERS, FL, USA (79%); TAMPA, FL, USA (79%); FLORIDA, USA (93%); MASSACHUSETTS, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (92%)

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